2:Scott G-5 (1870's-1909)1910 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

CHAPTER LIII

MINISTERS OF STATE

642 WHEN Mindôn Min heard in 1874 that the elections had gone against the ministry, and that Disraeli was to be Premier, he sighed, and said: "Then poor Ga-la-sa-tong (Gladstone) is in prison, I suppose. I am sorry for him. I don't think he was a bad fellow, and I gave him the Fifteen-string Salwè (the Burmese Order of Knighthood) a year or two ago." That is the Burmese notion of how to settle the Opposition. The lines of statesmen in the Royal City of Gems were not cast in pleasant places. If they rose rapidly, they came down with as much precipitation; and their fall was as crushing as ordinarily it was inevitable. The coolie of to-day might be the minister of to-morrow; and a month hence he might be spread-eagled in the court of the palace, with a vertical sun beating down upon him and huge stones piled on his chest and stomach. Or he might be treated even more summarily than this. When King Tharrawaddy succeeded he made Bagyidaw's ministers work as slaves on the roads for a time, and when this exercise had quite worn them out, charitably put them to death, without the frightful barbarities which characterised his treatment of the upstart queen dowager and her quondàm all-powerful brother Minthagyi. A more recent example was that of the Naingan-gya Wundauk. This unfortunate statesman was sent in 1880 as an ambassador to the English Raj, and after eight months' stay on board of a steamer at Thayetmyo, a few miles inside the British frontier, came back to say that his mission had failed, and that in fact he had been told to go away. He did not survive long. It was a week or two

2:Scott C-5 (1870's-1909)1910 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

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before he was admitted to see the king; and when he did see him the meeting was unpleasant. Next day the portly wundauk "died of apoplexy."

Sudden deaths were not at all uncommon. An official displeased him in some way, and Mindôn Min said emphatically, "I don't want to see that man any more." The poor wretch left the royal presence to be seized by lictors outside and killed more or less rapidly. A day or two afterwards his majesty would ask where so-and-so was. "Alas! sire," was the answer, "he died of chagrin shortly after the lord of the earth and ocean cast eyes of displeasure on him." Then the Convener of the Fifth Great Synod quoted a pious saw from the Lawkanidi, and turned his mind to other matters. He made it a special boast that never in all his reign had he ordered an execution. Yet many people died of "official colic" during the time he was on the throne, and Colonel Sladen arrived sixty seconds too late with a respite for one of the pious monarch's own sons. The sound of the hoofs of the English Resident's horse as he galloped past the astrologers' monastery to the execution ground only quickened the headsman's sword. The hapless Padein Mintha should have perished with the setting sun. There were still long shadows slanting up from the trees by the royal foundry when the colonel reined in and upbraided the presiding Minister for his bloodthirsty haste. The Lingayāma Sadaw, when he heard the story, said the ayebaing should have been a Buddhist and might probably become a yahanda in no very distant existence.

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Yet King Mindôn was undoubtedly a kindly man. The stories which occasionally appeared about him in the English papers of twenty years or so back were not true. He never got a pea-rifle and "potted" his subjects from the palace verandahs when he was bored. They libelled him who said he did. He was a good Buddhist, and never took life of man or animal. King Thibaw was, perhaps, not quite so strict in his notions. When he first came to the throne he unearthed the spear with which his grandfather Tharrawaddy used occasionally to spit his counsellors. The young king's aim was not quite so good, or his purposes not quite so deadly. He prodded a few heralds and interpreters, and

2:Scott G-5 (1870's-1909)1910 APl Burma
Burmese AP4

to hold his land free from taxes for such a period as may be necessary to bring it into a thorough state of cultivation. In such a case as this he has to apply to the thugyi—the old hereditary officers being retained throughout British Burma —of his circle, if the land does not exceed five acres in extent. If it is above that area, application has to be made to the English Assistant-commissioner, or to the Deputy-commissioner in charge of the district, if the average of the new claim exceeds fifty. The land is then surveyed and a grant is drawn up specifying the term of years during which he shall be free from imposts. This varies according to the kind of jungle which is to be cleared away, and the kind of crops intended to be grown. The exemption is in no case for less than a year. If rice is to be grown, seven years is the longest term of rent-free tenure, but for orchard cultivation it extends to twelve years. In a few cases, where the nature of the ground necessitates, in addition to clearing away the forest growth, the digging of channels for irrigation, and the erection of dams, extension even of this long period is granted. As in France, Norway, Japan, and Switzerland, the farms are all very small, in some cases almost absurdly so. Along the old frontier the holdings averaged only about five acres, in the Rangoon district from sixteen to twenty acres is the ordinary size, but here and there are a few considerably larger. It would, however, be a great mistake to endeavour to introduce larger tenancies. It is entirely against the genius of the people, and the appearance of foreign capitalists could not be otherwise than disastrous. The present mode of cultivation is slovenly enough, and larger farms would most certainly not tend to remedy the defect, which is due in great part to the superabundance of available arable land lying waste. Burma is progressing fast enough as it is. The abundance of rich land, the facility with which rights over it can be acquired, the great demand for rice, and the ever-increasing counter demand for European goods, the fixed, though heavy taxation, the cessation of all irregular and unexpected collections, the absolute personal security enjoyed by all under the English administration: all these benefits have resulted in the trebling of the population of Lower Burma during twenty-six years since the annexation of Pegu;

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2:Scott G-5 (1870's-1909)1910 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

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in the more than trebling of the trade—the value of the sea-borne merchandise alone having doubled and reached twelve and a half millions sterling during the ten years previous to 1881—and in the wonderful increase in revenue, which makes Burma the most valuable of all the provinces under the Indian Government. Now that all Burma is one province the increase of revenue and the contribution paid to the Imperial Government have gone on increasing with a regularity which is almost automatic.

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

000 situation with regard to other nations, its climate, its occupations. It is a great subject that I cannot go into. I wish to take all such things as I find them, and to discuss only the effect of the religion upon the courage of the people, upon its fighting capabilities. That religion may have a very serious effect one way or the other, no one can doubt. I went through the war of annexation, from 1885 to 1889, and from it I will draw my examples.

175 642 721 When we declared war in Upper Burma, and the column advanced up the river in November 1885, there was hardly any opposition. A little fight there was at the frontier fort of Minhla, but beyond that nothing. The river that might have been blocked was open; the earthworks had no cannon, the men no guns. Such a collapse was never seen. There was no organization, no material, no money. The men wanted officers to command and teach them; the officers wanted authority and ability to command. The people looked to their rulers to repel the invaders; the rulers looked to the people. There was no common intelligence or will between them. Everything was wanting; nothing was as it should be. And so Mandalay fell without a shot, and King Thibaw, the young, incapable, kind-hearted king, was taken into captivity.

175 642 721 That was the end of the first act, brief and bloodless. For a time the people were stupefied. They could not understand what had happened; they could not guess what was going to happen. They expected that the English would soon retire, and that then their own government would reorganize itself. Meanwhile they kept quiet.

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

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It is curious to think how peaceful the country really was from November 1885 till June 1886. And then the trouble came. The people had by that time, even in the wild forest villages, begun to understand that we wanted to stay, that we did not intend going away unless forced to. They felt that it was of no further use looking to Mandalay for help. We had begun, too, to consider about collecting taxes, to interfere with the simple machinery of local affairs, to show that we meant to govern. And as the people did not desire to be governed—certainly not by foreigners, at least—they began to organize resistance. They looked to their local leaders for help, and, as too often these local governors were not very capable men, they sought, as all people have done, the assistance of such men of war as they could find—brigands, and freelances, and the like—and put themselves under their orders. The whole country rose, from Bhamo to Minhla, from the Shan Plateau to the Chin Mountains. All Upper Burma was in a passion of insurrection, a very fury of rebellion against the usurping foreigners. Our authority was confined to the range of our guns. Our forts were attacked, our convoys ambushed, our steamers fired into on the rivers. There was no safety for an Englishman or a native of India, save within the lines of our troops, and it was soon felt that these troops were far too few to cope with the danger. To overthrow King Thibaw was easy, to subdue the people a very different thing.

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It is almost impossible to describe the state of Upper Burma in 1886. It must be remembered that the central government was never very strong

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

—in fact, that beyond collecting a certain amount of taxes, and appointing governors to the different provinces, it hardly made itself felt outside Mandalay and the large river towns. The people to a great extent governed themselves. They had a very good system of village government, and managed nearly all their local affairs. But beyond the presence of a governor, there was but little to attach them to the central government. There was, and is, absolutely no aristocracy of any kind at all. The Burmese are a community of equals, in a sense that has probably never been known elsewhere. All their institutions are the very opposite to feudalism. Now, feudalism was instituted to be useful in war. The Burmese customs were instituted that men should live in comfort and ease during peace; they were useless in war. So the natural leaders of a people, as in other countries, were absent. There were no local great men; the governors were men appointed from time to time from Mandalay, and usually knew nothing of their charges; there were no rich men, no large landholders—not one. There still remained, however, one institution that other nations have made useful in war, namely, the organization of religion. For Buddhism is fairly well organized—certainly much better than ever the government was. It has its heads of monasteries, its Gaing-dauks, its Gaing-oks, and finally the Thathanabaing, the head of the Burmese Buddhism. The overthrow of King Thibaw had not injured any of this. This was an organization in touch with the whole people, revered and honoured by every man and woman and child in the country. In this

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

terrible scene of anarchy and confusion, in this death peril of their nation, what were the monks doing? 795 642

We know what religion can do. We have seen how it can preach war and resistance, and can organize that war and resistance. We know what ten thousand priests preaching in ten thousand hamlets can effect in making a people almost unconquerable, in directing their armies, in strengthening their determination. We remember La Vendée, we remember our Puritans, and we have had recent experience in the Soudan. We know what Christianity has done again and again; what Judaism, what Mahommedanism, what many kinds of paganism, have done.

To those coming to Burma in those days, fresh from the teachings of Europe, remembering recent events in history, ignorant of what Buddhism means, there was nothing more surprising than the fact that in this war religion had no place. They rode about and saw the country full of monasteries; they saw the monasteries full of monks, whom they called priests; they saw that the people were intensely attached to their religion; they had daily evidence that Buddhism was an abiding faith in the hearts of the people. And yet, for all the assistance it was to them in the war, the Burmese might have had no faith at all. 795 642 721

The explanation is, that the teachings of the Buddha forbid war. All killing is wrong, all war is hateful; nothing is more terrible than this destroying of your fellow-man. There is absolutely no getting free of this commandment. The teaching of the Buddha is that you must strive to make your

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

own soul perfect. This is the first of all things, and comes before any other consideration. Of the virtues that only war can create and nourish this teaching knows nothing. Be pure and kind-hearted, full of charity and compassion, and so you may do good to others. These are the vows the Buddhist monks make, these are the vows they keep; and so it happened that all that great organization was useless to the patriot fighter, was worse than useless, for it was against him. The whole spectacle of Burma in those days, with the country seething with strife, and the monks going about their business calmly as ever, begging their bread from door to door, preaching of peace, not war, of kindness, not hatred, of pity, not revenge, was to most foreigners quite inexplicable. They could not understand it. I remember a friend of mine with whom I went through many experiences speaking of it with scorn. He was a cavalry officer, 'the model of a light cavalry officer'; he had with him a squadron of his regiment, and we were trying to subdue a very troubled part of the country.

We were camping in a monastery, as we frequently did—a monastery on a hill near a high golden pagoda. The country all round was under the sway of a brigand leader, and sorely the villagers suffered at his hands now that he had leapt into unexpected power. The villages were half abandoned, the fields untilled, the people full of unrest; but the monasteries were as full of monks as ever; the gongs rang, as they ever did, their message through the quiet evening air; the little boys were taught there just the same; the trees were watered and the gardens swept as if there were no change

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

721 pieces of the cement and threw them at the troops.
157 He would not surrender—not he—and he was killed.
701 There were many like him. The whole war was little affairs of this kind—a hundred, three hundred, of our men, and much the same, or a little more, of theirs. They only once or twice raised a force of two thousand men. Nothing can speak more forcibly of their want of organization than this. The whole country was pervaded by bands of fifty or a hundred men, very rarely amounting to more than two hundred, and no two bands ever acted in concert.

It is probable that most of the best men of the country were against us. It is certain, I think, that of those who openly joined us and accompanied us in our expedition, very, very few were other than men who had some private grudge to avenge, or some purpose to gain, by opposing their own people. Of such as these you cannot expect very much. And yet there were exceptions—men who showed up all the more brilliantly because they were exceptions—men whom I shall always honour. There were two I remember best of all. They are both dead now.

722 One was the eldest son of the hereditary governor
642 of a part of the country called Kawlin. It is in
631 the north-west of Upper Burma, and bordered on a semi-independent state called Wuntho. In the troubles that occurred after the deposition of King Thibaw, the Prince of Wuntho thought that he would be able to make for himself an independent kingdom, and he began by annexing Kawlin. So the governor had to flee, and with him his sons, and

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

naturally enough they joined our columns when we advanced in that direction, hoping to be replaced. They were replaced, the father as governor under the direction of an English magistrate, and the son as his assistant. They were only kept there by our troops, and upheld in authority by our power against Wuntho. But they were desired by many of their own people, and so, perhaps, they could hardly be called traitors, as many of those who joined us were. The father was a useless old man, but his son, he of whom I speak, was brave and honourable, good tempered and courteous, beyond most men whom I have met. It was well known that he was the real power behind his father. It was he who assisted us in an attempt to quell the insurrections and catch the raiders that troubled our peace, and many a time they tried to kill him, many a time to murder him as he slept.

There was a large gang of insurgents who came across the Mu River one day, and robbed one of his villages, so a squadron of cavalry was sent in pursuit. We travelled fast and long, but we could not catch the raiders. We crossed the Mu into unknown country, following their tracks, and at last, being without guides, we camped that night in a little monastery in the forest. At midnight we were attacked. A road ran through our camp, and there was a picket at each end of the road, and sentries were doubled.

It was just after midnight that the first shot was fired. We were all asleep when a sudden volley was poured into the south picket, killing one sentry and wounding another. There was no time to dress,

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

CHAPTER VII

GOVERNMENT

'Fire, water, storms, robbers, rulers—these are the five great evils.'
—*Burmese saying.*

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IT would be difficult, I think, to imagine anything worse than the government of Upper Burma in its later days. I mean by 'government' the king and his counsellors and the greater officials of the empire. The management of foreign affairs, of the army, the suppression of greater crimes, the care of the means of communication, all those duties which fall to the central government, were badly done, if done at all. It must be remembered that there was one difficulty in the way—the absence of any noble or leisured class to be entrusted with the greater offices. As I have shown in another chapter, there was no one between the king and the villager—no noble, no landowner, no wealthy or educated class at all. The king had to seek for his ministers among the ordinary people, consequently the men who were called upon to fill great offices of state were as often as not men who had no experience beyond the narrow limits of a village.

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

of these obtained in Burma any more than in the Europe of five hundred years ago, and the result was the same in both. The central government consisted of the king, who had no limit at all to his power, and the council of ministers, whose only check was the king. The executive and judicial were all the same: there was no appeal from one to the other. The only appeal from the ministers was to the king, and as the king shut himself up in his palace, and was practically inaccessible to all but high officials, the worthlessness of this appeal is evident. Outside Mandalay the country was governed by *wuns* or governors. These were appointed by the king, or by the council, or by both, and they obtained their position by bribery. Their tenure was exceedingly insecure, as any man who came and gave a bigger bribe was likely to obtain the former governor's dismissal and his own appointment. Consequently the usual tenure of office of a governor was a year. Often there were half a dozen governors in a year; sometimes a man with strong influence managed to retain his position for some years. From the orders of the governor there was an appeal to the council. This was in some matters useful, but in others not so. If a governor sentenced a man to death—all governors had power of life and death—he would be executed long before an appeal could reach the council. Practically no check was possible by the palace over distant governors, and they did as they liked. Anything more disastrous and fatal to any kind of good government than this it is impossible to imagine. The governors did what they considered right in

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

642 their own eyes, and made as much money as they
681 could, while they could. They collected the taxes and as much more as they could get; they administered the laws of Manu in civil and criminal affairs, except when tempted to deviate therefrom by good reasons; they carried out orders received from Mandalay, when these orders fell in with their own desires, or when they considered that disobedi-
[641] ence might be dangerous. It is a Burmese proverb
[539] that officials are one of the five great enemies of mankind, and there was, I think (at all events in the latter days of the kingdom), good reason to remember it. And yet these officials were not bad men in themselves; on the contrary, many of them were men of good purpose, of natural honesty, of right principles. In a well-organized system they would have done well, but the system was rotten to the core.

642 It may be asked why the Burmese people remained quiet under such a rule as this; why they did not rise and destroy it, raising a new one in its place; how it was that such a state of corruption lasted for a year, let alone for many years.

And the answer is this: However bad the government may have been, it had the qualities of its defects. If it did not do much to help the people, it did little to hinder them. To a great extent it left them alone to manage their own affairs in their own way. Burma in those days was like a great untended garden, full of weeds, full of flowers too, each plant striving after its own way, gradually evolving into higher forms. Now sometimes it seems to me to be like an old Dutch garden, with

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

the paths very straight, very clean swept, with the trees clipped into curious shapes of bird and beast, tortured out of all knowledge, and many of the flowers mown down. The Burmese government left its people alone; that was one great virtue. And, again, any government, however good, however bad, is but a small factor in the life of a people; it comes far below many other things in importance, A short rainfall for a year is more disastrous than a mad king; a plague is worse than fifty grasping governors; social rottenness is incomparably more dangerous than the rottenest government.

And in Burma it was only the supreme government, the high officials, that were very bad. It was only the management of state affairs that was feeble and corrupt; all the rest was very good. The land laws, the self-government, the social condition of the people, were admirable. It was so good that the rotten central government made but little difference to the people, and it would probably have lasted for a long while if not attacked from outside. A greater power came and upset the government of the king, and established itself in his place; and I may here say that the idea that the feebleness or wrong-doing of the Burmese government was the cause of the downfall is a mistake. If the Burmese government had been the best that ever existed, the annexation would have happened just the same. It was a political necessity for us.

The central government of a country is, as I have said, not a matter of much importance. It has very little influence in the evolution of the soul of a people. It is always a great deal worse than the

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

people themselves—a hundred years behind them in civilization, a thousand years behind them in morality. Men will do in the name of government acts which, if performed in a private capacity, would cover them with shame before men, and would land them in a gaol or worse. The name of government is a cloak for the worst passions of manhood. It is not an interesting study, the government of mankind.

A government is no part of the soul of the people, but is a mere excrescence; and so I have but little to say about this of Burma, beyond this curious fact—that religion had no part in it. Surely this is a very remarkable thing, that a religion having the hold upon its followers that Buddhism has upon the Burmese has never attempted to grasp the supreme authority and use it to its ends.

It is not quite an explanation to say that Buddhism is not concerned with such things; that its very spirit is against the assumption of any worldly power and authority; that it is a negation of the value of these things. Something of this sort might be said of other religions, and yet they have all striven to use the temporal power.

I do not know what the explanation is unless it be that the Burmese believe their religion and other people do not. However that may be, there is no doubt of the fact. Religion had nothing whatever—absolutely nothing in any way at all—to do with government. There are no exceptions. What has led people to think sometimes that there were exceptions is the fact that the king confirmed the Thathanabaing—the head of the community of monks—

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

after he had been elected by his fellow-monks. 642
The reason of this was as follows: All ecclesiastical 793
matters—I use the word 'ecclesiastical' because I 795
can find no other—were outside the jurisdiction of civil limits. By 'ecclesiastical' I mean such matters as referred to the ownership and habitation of monasteries, the building of pagodas and places of prayer, the discipline of the monkhood. Such questions were decided by ecclesiastical courts under the Thathanabaing.

Now, it was necessary sometimes, as may be understood, to enforce these decrees, and for that reason to apply to civil power. Therefore there must be a head of the monks acknowledged by the civil power as head, to make such applications as might be necessary in this, and perhaps some other such circumstances.

It became, therefore, the custom for the king to acknowledge by order the elect of the monks as Thathanabaing for all such purposes. That was all. The king did not appoint him at all.

Any such idea as a monk interfering in the affairs 642
of state, or expressing an opinion on war or law or 792
finance, would appear to the Burmese a negation of their faith. They were never led away by the idea that good might come of such interference. This terrible snare has never caught their feet. They hold that a man's first duty is to his own soul. Never think that you can do good to others at the same time as you injure yourself, and the greatest good for your own heart is to learn that beyond all this turmoil and fret there is the Great Peace—so great that we can hardly understand it, and to reach

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

642 it you must fit yourself for it. The monk is he who
772 is attempting to reach it, and he knows that he cannot do that by attempting to rule his fellow-man; that is probably the very worst thing he could do. And therefore the monkhood, powerful as they were, left all politics alone. I have never been able to hear of a single instance in which they even expressed an opinion either as a body or as individuals on any state matter.

It is true that, if a governor oppressed his people, the monks would remonstrate with him, or even, in the last extremity, with the king; they would plead with the king for clemency to conquered peoples, to rebels, to criminals; their voice was always on the side of mercy. As far as urging the greatest of all virtues upon governors and rulers alike, they may be said to have interfered with politics; but this is not what is usually understood by religion interfering in things of state. It seems to me we usually mean the reverse of this, for we are of late beginning to regard it with horror. The Burmese have always done so. They would think it a denial of all religion.

642 And so the only things worth noting about the government of the Burmese were its exceeding badness, and its disconnection with religion. That it would have been a much stronger government had it been able to enlist on its side all the power of the monkhood, none can doubt. It might even have been a better government; of that I am not sure. But that such a union would have meant the utter destruction of the religion, the debasing of the very soul of the people, no one who has tried to

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

understand that soul can doubt. And a soul is worth very many governments.

But when you left the central government, and came down to the management of local affairs, there was a great change. You came straight down from the king and governor to the village and its headman. There were no lords, no squires, nor ecclesiastical power wielding authority over the people.

Each village was to a very great extent a self-governing community composed of men free in every way. The whole country was divided into villages, sometimes containing one or two hamlets at a little distance from each other—offshoots from the parent stem. The towns, too, were divided into quarters, and each quarter had its headman. These men held their appointment-orders from the king as a matter of form, but they were chosen by their fellow-villagers as a matter of fact. Partly this headship was hereditary, not from father to son, but it might be from brother to brother, and so on. It was not usually a very coveted appointment, for the responsibility and trouble were considerable, and the pay small. It was 10 per cent. on the tax collections. And with this official as their head, the villagers managed nearly all their affairs. Their taxes, for instance, they assessed and collected themselves. The governor merely informed the headman that he was to produce ten rupees per house from his village. The villagers then appointed assessors from among themselves, and decided how much each household should pay. Thus a coolie might pay but four rupees, and a rice-

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

it well, no one can doubt. They taxed themselves without friction, they built their own monastery schools by voluntary effort, they maintained a very high, a very simple, code of morals, entirely of their own initiative.

All this has passed, or is passing away. The king has gone to a banishment far across the sea, the ministers are either banished or powerless for good or evil. It will never rise again, this government of the king, which was so bad in all it did, and only good in what it left alone. It will never rise again. The people are now part of the British Empire, subjects of the Queen. What may be in store for them in the far future no one can tell, only we may be sure that the past can return no more. And the local government is passing away, too. It cannot exist with a strong government such as ours. For good or for evil, in a few years it, too, will be gone.

But, after all, these are but forms; the soul is far within. In the soul there will be no change. No one can imagine even in the far future any monk of the Buddha desiring temporal power, or interfering in any way with the government of the people. That is why I have written this chapter, to show how Buddhism holds itself towards the government. With us, we are accustomed to ecclesiastics trying to manage affairs of state, or attempting to grasp the secular power. It is in accordance with our ideals that they should do so. Our religious phraseology is full of such terms as lord and king and ruler and servant. Buddhism knows nothing of any of them. In our religion we

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

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are subject to the authority of deacons and priests and bishops and archbishops, and so on up to the Almighty Himself. But in Buddhism every man is free—free, subject to the inevitable laws of righteousness. There is no hierarchy in Buddhism: it is a religion of absolute freedom. No one can damn you except yourself; no one can save you except yourself. Governments cannot do it, and therefore it would be useless to try and capture the reins of government, even if you did not destroy your own soul in so doing. Buddhism does not believe that you can save a man by force.

And as Buddhism was, so it is, so it will remain. By its very nature it abhors all semblance of authority. It has proved that, under temptation such as no other religion has felt, and resisted; it is a religion of each man's own soul, not of governments and powers.